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ABSTRACT

The swinging of the educational pendulum in English-from a disillusionment with teaching grammar in the 1960s to the romance with "the basics" in the 1970s reveals the failure of English teachers to come to grips with languge and learning. This failure is due largely to a prevailing orientation toward the study of language as an object, rather than as a communicative process. An investigation of students' writing competence was conducted through assessing adult readers' ability to respond to clozed samples of the students' writing. The investigation began with an examination of the pieces of writing as objects and the development of an elaborate taxaonomy of textual errors; this approach proved inadequate and indefensible, however, and the investigators shifted to an analysis of the text as part of a communicative, interactional process with the reader. Basic distortions of the textual space between writer and reader were distinguished, and good written communicatcn was defined and assessed as writing that relevant readers can understand. (A clozed student writing sample, adult responses to it, a portion of the "Taxonomy of Written Communicative Misconstraints," and the "Typology of Textual Space Distortions" are included.) (GW)

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The Language Trap

Bruce Millar and Martin Nystrand*

Sometimes while driving, I have wondered why the rules of the road and their mastery are rarely matters of controversy, while conventions of the written language and their learning often are. No matter how many new traffic signs are introduced, I've never heard members of the younger generation complaining that traffic conventions are "stuffy" or "old hat." Nor, come to think of it, have I ever heard members of the older generation complaining that today's kids can't yield or stop as well as they used to. Everyone I know thinks that stopping for a red light 100% of the time without error is unquestionably desirable.

Language matters aren't like this, though. Neither is teaching writing. Unlike drivers, we must contend in education, or so it would seem, with an ancient and omnipresent engine known colloquially as The Pendulum. With credentials as impressive as those of Father Time, The Pendulum swings steadily on and presumably will swing forever in education like some great self-winding clock

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ticking away in the bowels of the earth itself. We can almost hear Professor Higgins lamenting what many today feel, Why can't English be more like the roads?

Consider the last ten years of English teaching. Picture yourself in the teachers' lounge in the late '60s. If you were prudent in those days, you knew that Warriner's Complete Course in Composition was a reactionary little tract, an unmentionable which, in days of yore when it was used, treated kids to overdoses of the trivial and the mechanical--the pedestrian and truly unimportant aspects of writing. Writing conventions were particularly where-it-was-not-at, and there was reason to suspect that they were even in basic conflict with the essence of language itself. If, as an English teacher, you stressed the differences between who and whom, lay and lie, its and it's--or God forbid, you actually used Warriner's in those years when college kids got shot and cities burned, you probably kept it all a big secret and put the Book away in a closet when your student teacher's supervisor came around to visit from the local ivory tower. Then you knew the consumate wisdom of speaking of "personal experience," "growth," "journal keeping," "creativity," "response to literature," and--that most magic of words--"Dartmouth." Knowing when to whisper "Dartmouth" could open a lot of doors. You talked of these things, you did--particularly if you wanted any friends early in the morning over coffee.

Today one can scarcely pick up a newspaper or magazine, get through a week of television, or sit through an evening of PTA without

being alerted to the "obvious fact" that Johnny (and all of his too, too many friends) can't write, meaning that Johnny (and don't forget Mary) doesn't give a damn, even if he knows how, about any of the genuinely trafficky aspects of English--commas, periods, spelling, the works. And Warriner's--that time-tested giver of the rules of the written road--has returned again to front center shelf. A lot of people have found it!

And so the pendulum has swung in the '70s. Right? Times have changed, and we've changed too. They'll change again, and we'll be ready then too. We're a resilient bunch, we are. If we're truly smart, we'll put away our old copies of books by the Jarring Johns (Dewey, Dixon, and Holt) in plain brown wrappers and keep them safe, in the same way that we should know to hang on to all our old ties and skirts. After all, today's romance with the Basics is nothing more than remediation for the excessive '60s, which were nothing more than redress for the mediocre '50s . . . . Right? In the popular view, swings of the Great Pendulum are not only inevitable; they are healthy for the profession because they eliminate extremes and excesses, and result in balanced educational programs. And that's progress.

As researchers and educators, we would like to suggest an alternative interpretation, namely that continued pendulum swinging in English education and language studies is more than anything testimony to a continuing failure to come to grips with language and learning--in short, to a well-established continuity of wrong questions. In this sense, periodic change in English education is more the stuff

of trendiness than genuine progess or improved understanding.

The difficulties are due in large measure to a prevailing orientation toward language itself. As long ago as 1916, the father of modern linguistics Ferdinand de Saussure made his classic distinction between la langue, or language, and la parole, or the use of language, speaking. Language scholars quickly opted to study the former, leaving largely unexamined the relationships between speakers and their language. Important scholars such as Saussure, Cassirer, Bloomfield, Jespersen, Lévi-Strauss, and Chomsky all have come to be known essentially for their seminal ideas regarding la langue, not la parole. This predilection for la langue has been enormously consequential, not only for what it has included and clarified, but also for what it has excluded.

Essentially language has been treated as an object, both academically and pedagogically. The historical and contemporary prominence of this focus is clear, for example, in curriculum, instruction, and evaluation in the language arts. In large measure, this emphasis accounts for a perennial obsession with formal grammar instruction (including Chomsky's transformation-generative), the effectiveness of which researchers perennially repudiate (for the latest examination of the effectiveness of formal grammar instruction, see Research in the Teaching of English, Spring 1976); for a typical (and truly bizarre) insistence on treating, teaching, and evaluating "writing" as a thing rather than a meaningful, communicative act

between a writer and a reader. Above all, this focus has couched the curriculum concerns of the language arts in terms of the preemptive question, "What is English?" rather than "What is appropriate activity in an English classroom?"

Our own experience with the Language Trap, as we have come to call this focus on language as an object, came about as a result of nearly two years' work in developing tests of literacy at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. In dealing with writing we came to adopt the following tenets which seemed defensible enough:

a) Writing is an activity

b) Reading is an activity

c) The mature writer can effectively assess the needs of relevant readers

d) Therefore, writing is a communicative act that takes place between two people.

The final point served in effect as a summary of the first three, emphasizing the character of communication as a process or activity, as well as the necessity to account for the reader's involvement or attention.

After much debate, confusion and discussion, we concluded that good written communication could be defined, and assessed, as writing which relevant readers can understand. Good writing could not satisfactorily be characterized as a formulaic object accompanied by slipshod prescriptions regarding introductory paragraphs, topic sentences, punctuation, run-ons, and the like. Rather, criteria for good written communication were more adequately (and parsimoniously)

stated with respect to the intended readership's facility for accessing the writer's intended meaning. Frank Smith's (Understanding Reading; Comprehension and Learning) model of comprehension as hypothesis testing was enlightening on the role of the reader in this process, and our investigations proceeded by clozing writing samples (deleting approximately every 5th word) and administering them as readability tests to intended readers, whose scores were then taken to bear on the communicative competence of the writer. In this way, we arrived at the position of modeling writing as an interactive process, and used the cloze procedure as an index of its success. Figures 1 and 2 are examples of the procedures involved.

Figures 1 and 2 about here.

In preliminary trials, a number of ninth grade papers written for a general adult audience were clozed and presented to a group of teachers who were requested to fill in the blanks. Certain papers were more difficult than others. A systematic analysis of the discrepancies between deleted writers' words and readers' guesses was performed in attempts to account for writing problems. It was at this point that we began to fall headlong into the Language Trap.

In accounting for the discrepancies, we came increasingly to orient ourselves to the pieces of writing as objects. We studied them in detail, even to the point of obsession. We began to detect, or so we thought, objective criteria that might define the structural form

of the essays and nothing else. In effect, we were forgetting about process and interaction, which had been so insightful at the start. Here is part of what we generated, the Taxonomy of Written Communicative Misconstraints:

Figure 3 here

The taxonomy fell through. Teachers and researchers were very creative in inventing accounts for faults in student writing, and particularly in labeling these faults. The list of "errors" seemed interminable, and the taxonomy became ornate to the point of baroque. As much as any other factor, its sheer weight and complexity caused it to go the way of all dinosaurs.

This taxonomy of errors based on characteristics of the text gave way to an analysis of reader interactions with the text. The reader was reintroduced into our considerations of writing, and emphasis reverted once again from the text-as-object to the text as part of a communicative, interactional process. In reorganizing writer-reader discrepancies according to an analysis of interactions rather than textual faults, simple patterns emerged. Three basic impediments to written communication were distinguished as follows:

a) Misconstraint: "Wadya mean? That doesn't go with that!"

In psycholinguistic terms, a misconstraint involves the presence of cueing systems which lead to confirmation of aberrant predictions on the part of the reader.

b) Impaction: "Huh? Hold on a minute. Ya lost me. Whydya wannt put that with that?"

In psycholinguistic terms, impaction is a dense compounding of cueing systems resulting in readers' inabilities to discern significant differences and regularities for purposes of prediction. It is information overload.

c) Rarefaction: "Alright already. Quit beating around the bush. Get to the point."

In psycholinguistic terms, rarefaction involves the inadequate presence of relevant cueing systems, resulting in readers' inabilities adequately to confirm predictions necessary to comprehension.

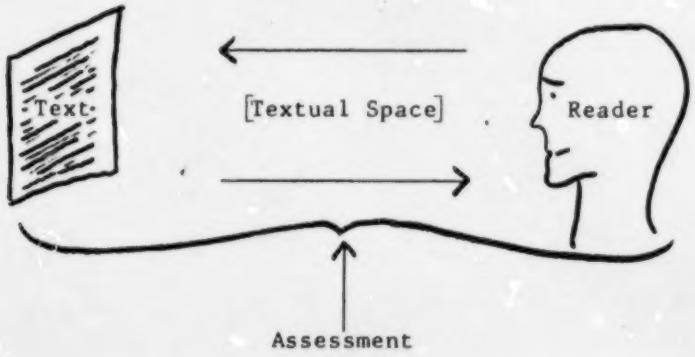
A full typology of Distortions of Textual Space follows at the end.

To sum up, our initial investigation of writing began with the assumption that assessment involved an examination of the text for strengths and weaknesses in the text:

Figure 4. Normal Model of Writing Assessment

Finding this approach inadequate and indefensible, we shifted our ground and introduced the notion that many of the salient factors of written communication, and many of the criteria of good writing lie, not in the text per se, but rather in the interaction between between the reader and the text. We called it textual space:

Figure 5. Revised Model of Writing Assessment



In exploring this revised model, our attempts to account for distortions of this textual space, or communication glitches, unwittingly and inevitably gave way to an analysis of the text, with the creation of the elaborate taxonomy which persistently pinned the blame on the writer at the point of the text. By focussing so hard on what we sought to understand, we were drawn away from the functions of language and into the text itself. Focussing on language as object, we had fallen straight into the Language Trap.

In retrospect, the need for compatibility between model and method of investigation seems obvious. Clearly, if writing is to be considered an interactional process, errors in writing need be studied in terms of distortions of that process. While it plays an important role in the writing process, the text is mainly instrumental and subordinate to the reader-writer interaction that characterizes the process itself.

The results of this research do not lend support to the usefulness of models or exemplary texts in the teaching of writing.

Rather, support is found for stressing the role of audience, or more precisely, the necessity of the writer's internalization of the role of the Other vis-à-vis writing. The Significant Other for the writer is, in short, the reader. In addition to our own research, we take as authorities on this point George Herbert Mead (Mind, Self, and Society), Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (The Social Construction of Reality), James Moffett (Teaching the Universe of Discourse), and James Britton (Language and Learning; The Development of Writing Abilities: 11-18). Teachers would do well to help learners become aware that they are writing for others--particular others, and that their readers can be confused and frustrated with their resulting texts in three basic ways as we have outlined them. In this process of socialization with respect to writing, children need to orient themselves less to language per se (la langue), and more to the requirements of the communicative situation itself, becoming increasingly sensitive to what is involved in successful communication. Ideally everyone will get the point.

Figure 1. Clozed Writing Sample

Clozed Writing Sample:

TOPIC: Does the Government Have the Right to Impose Laws on Us for Our Own Protection?

Yes, I _____	think
that the laws are _____.	okay
The people that puts _____	out
the laws are doing it _____	for
us to help us, _____	not
to hurt us. The _____	seatbelt
law, since they made us _____	use
it my sister _____	said
that there isn't so _____	many
head injuries on U-2 _____	where
she is nursing. And the _____	laws
hasn't come out yet _____	about
death penalty but I _____	think
they should, because I _____	think
there won't be so _____	much
crime. I also think the _____	OPP's
could be harder on the _____	people
that steal, kill and _____.	rapes
And the law for _____	going
over 60 on the _____	401
that is to _____	help
us to save _____.	gas
But I am just _____	one
person with my _____	ideas
and it might be _____	different
then my friends, family and _____	maybe
you judges. I belive _____	in
all laws, some even _____	sounds
crazy but, what there _____	doing
is for us.	

(fold back here)

Figure 2. Adult Responses to Clozed Writing Sample

Adult Responses to Clozed Writing Sample:

Yes, I think
that the laws are okay. (2 good; right; 3 alright)
The people that puts out (3 down; 2 on; together; forth)
the laws are doing it for (3 to)
us to help us, not
to hurt us. The seatbelt
law, since they made us use (6 wear; okay; do)
it my sister said (4 says; knows; feels)
that there isn't so many
head injuries on U-2 where (because)
she is nursing. And the laws (6 law; decision; government;
hasn't come out yet about (against; on; 2 for; ---) police)
death penalty but I think
they should, because I think (know)
there won't be so much (many)
crime. I also think the OPP's (police; 4 law; 3 laws; courts)
could be harder on the people (criminals; kids)
that steal, kill and rapes. (----; 6 rape; 2 rob; speed)
And the law for going (3 driving; speed; 4 speeding)
over 60 on the 401 (6 highway; highways; -----)
that is to help (2 make)
us to save gas. (4 lives; ourselves; money)
But I am just one
person with my ideas (10 opinions)
and it might be different (that; wrong; alright; better)
than my friends, family and maybe (teachers; others; also;
you judges. I belive in (5 that) police; ale; even)
all laws, some even sounds (4 are; slightly; so; maybe; 2 is;
crazy but, what there doing 2 are; for)
is for us.

Figure 3. Taxonomy of Misconstraints (Contextual Misconstraints)

a. interpositional: unanticipated intrusion in a predicted linearity:

The people in the back hit the front seat and what do you know some of the people have broken noses.

b. irreplece: rarefaction of cueing systems resulting in information loss (the opposite of impaction):

The Government always has good in mind but it often inforces laws that don't please a lot of people. For instance the (driver) legislations; Canadians are very upset at the number of people who have been killed or very badly injured because of the seat-belts. Also the laws have been changed too many times . . . . (seatbelt)

c. disjunction: unprepared shift in an expected, predicted linearity:

(Paragraph on seatbelts concludes) . . . I think that the _____ will get used to these new laws, and people will see the laws the government put out are for our protection.. (snowmobilers)

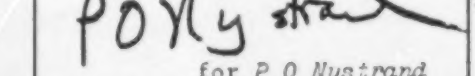
d. antecedal: miscue resulting from a prior semantic, lexical ambituigy:

I think the law did have our good in mind when they inforced speed limit laws, and raised the drinking and smoking ages. They (_____) that the laws would decrease the number of teenage smokers . . . . (felt)

e. abortive modulate: unpredicted shirt in an unanticipated linearity, which detracts from the reader's sense of reliability with respect to predictability within the discourse in question.

(Paragraph develops idea that legislators do not always consider the full implications of their propositions before passing them. Paragraph ends) . . . Canadians are very upset at the number of people who have been killed or very badly injured because of seatbelts. Also, the laws have been (ignored) too many times, from all (passengers), to no belts for children, to no shoulder belts if they are not connected. I find it very sickening. (changed);(belts)

TYPOLOGY OF TEXTUAL SPACE DISTORTIONS

Level of Analysis	Distortion Type: A. MISCONSTRAINT	B. IMPACTION	C. RAREFACTION
I. GRAPHIC	I.A. *GRAPHIC MISCONSTRAINT*  for *P O Nystrand*	I.B. *GRAPHIC IMPACTION* for *let*	I.C. *GRAPHIC RAREFACTION* *N O W H E R E*
II. SYNTACTIC	II.A. *SYNTACTIC MISCONSTR'T* *Your _____ going to get where your _____ with a seatbelt on.* (*still*)(*going*)	II.B. *SYNTACTIC IMPACTION* *This is the preacher all shaven and shorn that married the man all tattered and torn that kissed... in the house that Jack built.*	II.C. *SYNTACTIC RAREFACTION* *when I stopped pandering temporarily*
III. LEXICAL	III.A. *LEXICAL MISCONSTR'T* *[The law* {*on* / *controlling* / *for*} *drinking is for your own safety (against)]* written to adults	III.B. *LEXICAL IMPACTION* *[Concepts and the language that infuses and implements them give power and strategy to cognitive activity]* to most people.	III.C. *LEXICAL RAREFACTION* *We define national interests as internally generated and outward flowing forces from within any country which bind that country in some structured way to another country.*
IV. CONTEXTUAL	IV.A. *CONTEXTUAL MISCS'T* Paragraph on seatbelts ends: *I think that the _____ will get used to these new laws, and people will see the laws the government put out are for our protection.* (*snowmobilers*)	IV.B. *CONTEXTUAL IMPACTION* For most people: *[Epochē is the suspension of belief in the ontological characteristics of experienced objects* (Schutz, 1970, p 317)*]* with no further discussion.	IV.C. *CONTEXTUAL RAREFACTION* *This _____ law is for our protection. Let's say you are driving along and a dog runs across the road in front of you. . . . The people in the front are going to go through the windshield . . . .* (*seatbelt*)